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# ART AND PROGRESS

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## THE SELECTION OF ARTISTS TO EXECUTE PUBLIC WORKS\*

BY CHARLES MOORE

THE rapid increase in wealth in this country manifests itself, among other ways, in works of public art. Memorials of men and deeds are being produced at a rate unprecedented in history. Patriotic societies, male and female, are busily engaged in digging forgotten statesmen out of the graveyard of oblivion and in setting up their effigies on pedestals supplied by willing national, State or city governments. The lodge companions of popular mayors find no difficulty in raising the ten or fifteen thousand dollars necessary to procure a bronze presentation of their departed brothers; and as quickly as the sculptor can be forced to action this familiar type of the American popular idol is set up for the admiration of posterity. There he stands, or sits, as the case may be, his bronze trousers carefully creased, his rotund body proclaiming the joy of living, and his vote-alluring smile beaming on the passer-by.

So rapidly are these memorials multiplying that friends of the candidates for metallic immortality find difficulty in snatching suitable sites from the traffic that congests the streets of the fast-growing cities; and yet what is the use in erecting memorials except where men congregate? Happily the people resent placing effigies of local statesmen in public parks; and in some quarters there is manifest a disposition to seek forms of commemoration other than statues of

men in modern dress. Pantaloons make for the comfort of the living, indeed; but he must be a statesman of the Lincoln type whose personality is sufficient to raise him above the conventional costume of the present era, even when rendered by a capable sculptor.

The task of supplying works of public art usually is entrusted to a commission of laymen. And here an amusing transformation often occurs. By some miracle of transubstantiation the men selected suddenly become judges of art and artists. Two out of the three commissioners will peruse with zeal the laudatory biographies sent them by zealous artists seeking the job; and they gaze with profound knowledge at the submitted photographs of the executed work of these self-advertising artists. The third commissioner, a busy business man, comes late to the meetings, and, on being appealed to, selects from the pictures the most romantic presentation of a subject, and with an air of finality declares, "I don't profess to know much about art, but this one fills my eye!" His fellow commissioners bow to the superior wisdom of the successful man, and selection of the artist is made accordingly. Thereupon the members of the commission become the active partisans of the man of their choice; and the more obscure he is, the greater credit they take to themselves for having discovered genius.

There is, however, a better side to the

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matter. There are commissions made up of modest laymen who earnestly desire to have the work entrusted to them executed by competent artists, whether architects, sculptors or painters. These commissioners often go wrong because they do not know the method of procedure calculated to obtain good results.

The purpose of this paper is to give advice as to methods of selecting artists to execute public works. Yet, even if suggested methods shall be followed, the result can not be guaranteed. The commission adopting them, however, can have the negative satisfaction of feeling assured that they have done their full duty to posterity; and that only Omnipotence is able to overrule the fallibility of the human mind and always to guide fingers even of genius.

I speak now as a layman who for some twenty-five years has been called upon, from time to time, to assist in the selection of men to execute works of a public and semi-public character. Hospitals, schools, filtration plants and various branches of engineering have been among the problems, as well as statues and plans for buildings and even for cities. It has been my good fortune to know architects, landscape architects, painters and sculptors who, by common consent, were accounted among the first in their several professions; and I have been present at many conferences where these men were called upon to pass upon the works of fellow artists. My experience has taught me that between the layman and the artist, using the term in its broadest sense, there is a great gulf fixed. The artist begins with a natural endowment or gift; by training he acquires standards; by practice he obtains technical mastery; by travel and experience his mind is broadened, and he learns the secret of all great art, which is that, to use Saint-Gaudens's apt phrase, "It doesn't make much difference what you do; it is the way you do it that counts."

I believe it to be the province of the layman to obtain the best possible advice from those who, by ability, training and experience, are capable of giving it; and, having obtained that advice, to follow it

to the end; or else to reject it absolutely. The layman should never set himself up as a judge or a critic, but he is not bound to accept a result which is displeasing to him. This statement of limitations may seem radical, even revolutionary, but it becomes simply a truism when the same reasoning is applied to legal matters. "I see what you have done," exclaimed Secretary Root to a certain Major-General who for economy's sake had consulted an inferior architect. "You had a very important case, and you thought you yourself knew enough about it to get along with a cheap lawyer."

The first duty of an art commission composed of laymen is to obtain a competent professional adviser. In every city there is usually to be found one or more architects of ability, taste and public spirit. The architectural profession is calculated to bring the practitioner in touch with artists in the kindred professions of sculpture, painting and landscape architecture. Moreover, the architect deals with builders and contractors, who have their place in the execution of the work. He knows all the tricks of the trades, whether artistic or mechanical. He may have his favorites among artists, but usually he can be relied on to recommend the best men. Of course it is assumed that the adviser himself is not to be considered in the selection. If the competition is one involving architecture, it may be best to seek an adviser from out of town. The qualifications of the adviser should be generally recognized ability, a sense of public service demands, and, above all, the possession of artistic standards.

The next thing to be decided is as to whether the artist is to be obtained by direct selection or by means of a competition. For many and valid reasons direct selection is preferable. Artists of established reputation usually have as much work offered to them as they can do. Therefore they rarely enter open competitions; and in some professions they never do. Moreover, competitions, even under the best auspices, are uncertain in their results and are ex-

pensive to the participants; so that artists avoid them whenever they can do so.

In cases where direct selection is to be made, the professional adviser, after full consultation as to the project to be executed, suggests a number of artists, any one of whom should be able to design and to carry out the work in hand. And here it may be remarked that the ability to make an attractive sketch and the ability successfully to carry that sketch into execution are two separate things, and that, of the two, the ability to execute is by far the more important. Too much emphasis can not be laid on this consideration, and yet it is the point most often overlooked by the layman.

It is a fact recognized in the architectural profession that there are firms which bend all their energies to winning competitions. Now ability to win competitions is like the ability to pass college examinations. A peculiar knack is required, and success by no means indicates superior knowledge and ability. It is well known that the executed work of these competition-winning firms rarely carries out the promise of their sketches. When direct commissions are given, such awards are made on the basis of executed work, which is, after all, the true test of ability. In two competitions that recently have come under my observation, architects have been selected whose offices are so busy with competitive sketches that they have little time to devote to working drawings, and the project is certain to suffer when building begins.

In mural painting, in portraiture, and in stained-glass work, direct selection is the rule, and here preliminary professional advice is especially desirable.

The professional adviser submits to the commission specimens of the executed work of the artists preferred. Either personal inspection of those works, or photographs, or other means may be employed in making this acquaintance. The selection of the artist is then made and the work is entrusted to him. The contract is drawn according to the rules of the profession, designs are submitted and these designs

are subjected to expert criticism with a view of obtaining suggestions for betterment. The commission reserves the right to reject the sketches altogether and ask for a new study, or to terminate the contract on payment for the work already done.

The most important work of art ever undertaken by the general government was entrusted to an architect selected directly. The Lincoln Memorial Commission asked the Commission of Fine Arts for advice as to the best method of selecting an architect. The advice was in favor of a direct selection. Thereupon the Fine Arts Commission was asked to name an architect. Henry Bacon was named, and he was asked to prepare designs. The Lincoln Memorial Commission asked John Russell Pope also to submit sketches for a memorial to be erected on various sites other than the one favored by the Commission of Fine Arts. The Lincoln Commission adopted and recommended to Congress both the site advocated by the Commission of Fine Arts and also the plans prepared by Mr. Bacon and approved by the last named Commission. Congress then sanctioned the action.

On one occasion I had the opportunity of asking a young sculptor to meet me in New York for consultation. I had never seen him before. He came to the interview thinking that he was to be taken to task for delay in finishing a certain piece of work. When he was told that a commission had decided to ask him to execute an equestrian statue, he was speechless. Finally he said, "I have never before heard of your project, but I accept the work and your people shall have the best that is in me." That best has proved very good.

On two occasions I was instructed to offer to leading American sculptors similar commissions. Their experience made the offers no novelty, but they also accepted with like assurances.

Charles McKim was in Washington when he received a telegram from President Cassatt, of the Pennsylvania Railroad, asking him to stop in Philadelphia on his way to New York. He

handed the telegram to me, saying, "I suppose Mr. Cassatt wants a new stoop for his house." It turned out that the railway president desired to have Mr. McKim design the Pennsylvania Station in New York, the largest building ever constructed at one time.

The unsolicited and unexpected commission is at once the greatest compliment and the greatest incentive an artist can have, and under its inspiration he does his best work.

Competitions seem still to be a necessary evil in certain cases, because of a mistaken idea prevalent among the people that competitions lead to the discovery of artists.

During the first four years of its existence the Commission of Fine Arts has spent a large amount of time in deciding which was the least objectionable among the sketches for public monuments of one kind or another submitted in competitions. Invariably the exhibition of mediocre work was the result of the local commissioners not knowing how to set about their task, and when the origin of their difficulties was explained to them they have gladly made a fresh start wherever it was possible to do so without injustice to the artists involved.

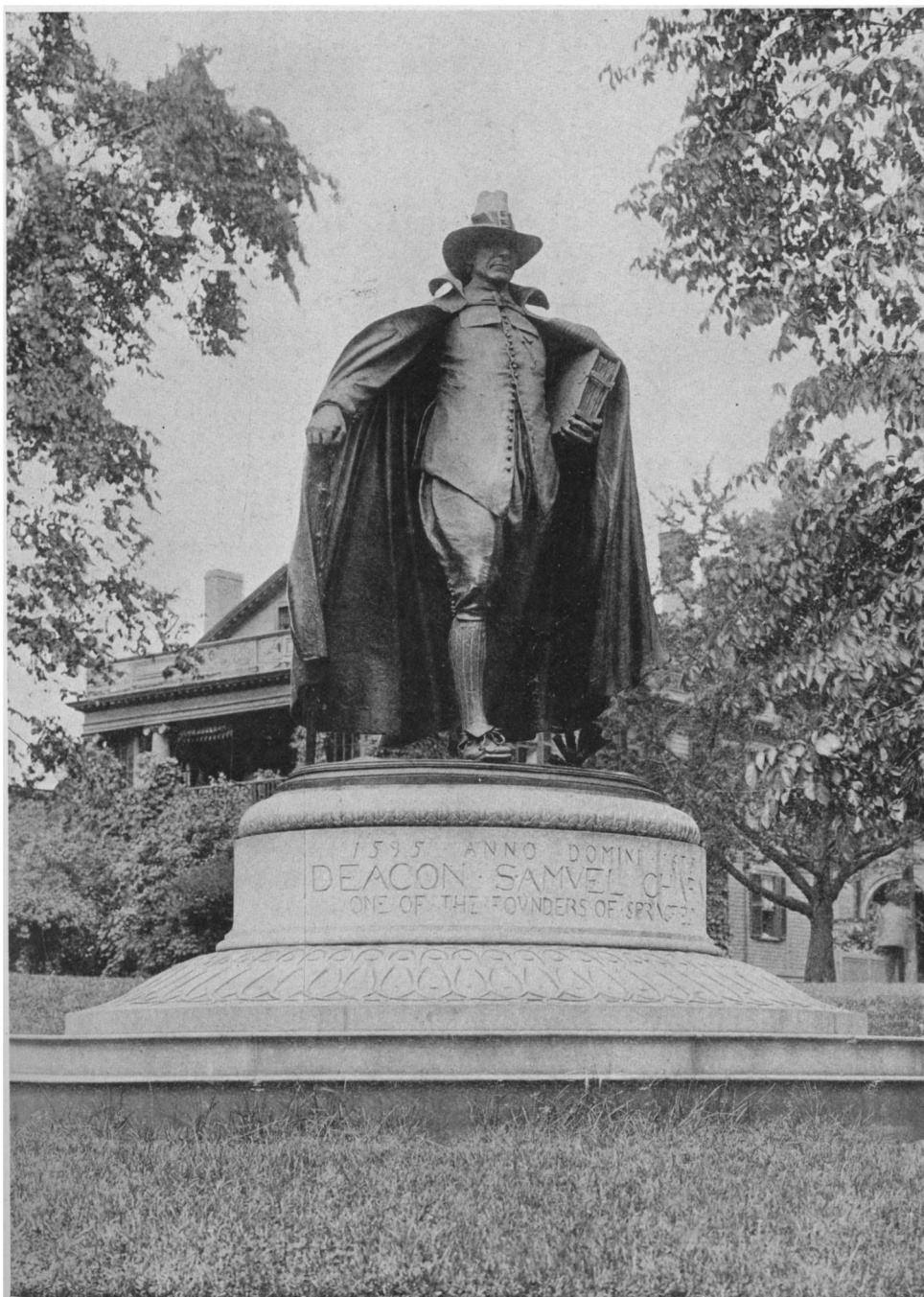
Competitions may be mitigated by limiting the number of artists invited to compete, and then paying each artist an amount sufficient to cover the necessary expense of making the preliminary sketches. A competition involves a program and a jury. The program is prepared by the professional adviser; its provisions are governed by the rules for competitions adopted by the American Institute of Architects, or whatever national society represents the particular profession. These rules embody the experience of that profession in dealing with the difficulties and perplexities involved in competitions, and they aim to protect both the artist and the patron. The program also states the local conditions surrounding the problem. The more exact and carefully prepared the program, the less difficulty the jury finds in arriving at a decision. Conversely, the looser the program the more room

for differences of opinion on the part of the jurors.

The jury should be selected by the commission from a list prepared by the professional adviser. No layman should act as a juror. An artist no less than a person under indictment is entitled to a jury of his peers. Even the artist as a juror may be biased by facile renderings and clever sketches, and not every artist has correct standards of judgment, but the chances are that by professional ability and experience the artist is qualified to pass judgment, whereas the layman is hopelessly incompetent to compare, to analyze and to reach a decision on a problem out of his line of thought and knowledge.

The professional adviser assists the jury, but he takes no part in the decisions. Having prepared the program he leaves to the jurors all awards rendered under it.

The unlimited competition, open to all competitors of recognized standing in the profession, has the one possible advantage that it offers to the younger men an opportunity to show their ability. I recall an open competition for one of the most important works of sculpture provided for by the national government. The jury was made up of Augustus Saint-Gaudens, Daniel Chester French, Charles F. McKim and Daniel H. Burnham. There were fifteen or twenty sketches submitted, as I remember, and Mr. Saint-Gaudens was carried away by one which, although ambitious in the extreme, gave promise of a great result. The others coincided with him, although they recognized the difficulties in execution. When the envelopes were opened it was found that the author of the sketch was a young sculptor who had but one considerable work of art to his credit, and that one involving a comparatively simple problem. Notwithstanding this drawback, the work was awarded to the young sculptor. That was twelve years ago. All but one of the jury have gone to their rewards. The work is not yet completed, but the portions already executed give assurance that the decision was amply justified.



THE PURITAN

AUGUSTUS SAINT-GAUDENS

A PUBLIC MONUMENT IN SPRINGFIELD, MASSACHUSETTS

NOTABLE IN DESIGN, EXECUTION AND PLACING

The case cited is an exceptional one. On the other hand, a competition for a fountain to cost approximately \$350,000 is now in progress in a neighboring city. The first stage (an unpaid open competition to select seven architects to enter the second stage) has just been completed. There were ninety-two designs submitted, and the preliminary sketches could not have cost the architects, for draughtsmen's salaries alone, less than \$30,000, or ten per cent of the entire cost of the fountain. The seven successful competitors in the first stage will now compete, along with three invited architects, in the final stage. All ten will receive a moderate compensation, and there will be four prizes, the highest one of which will no more than pay for office work. Of course, there is the grand prize of a contract to design and execute the fountain, but even here the successful competitor will receive no more than the ordinary payment due an architect.

Yet this competition is being conducted under the rules of the American Institute of Architects according to a program approved by the local chapter of that body, with a professional adviser of distinguished standing and a jury composed of three architects, a sculptor and a landscape architect, all men of highest reputation. Any one of the seven designs selected might well be executed, or any one of a dozen architects might have been entrusted to work out a problem clearly defined in the program. But public sentiment demanded an open competition.

The reason for not limiting the selection to one architect, or instituting a limited competition, was the pervasive and compelling idea that by an open competition some new and surpassingly fine solution might be submitted by an architect unknown to fame. The probability of the discovery of genius by means of competition, however, is so rare as to be practically negligible, and the development of artistic capability may safely be left to the ordinary method of slow ripening. The public, however, is rarely ready to subscribe to this idea, and hence competitions become imperative. Then, too, the fact that men are ready to submit sketches promotes competitions. The public always is willing to get something for nothing.

The conclusion of the matter, therefore, is this: The requisites for success in selecting artists to execute public work are competent professional advice, both at the outset and also during the execution of the work, and, in the case of competitions, preferably of the limited sort, a thoroughly prepared program, and a competent, unbiased professional jury, whose award shall prevail without question.

Finally, it should be understood that competitions are only for the selection of the artist; that every work of art is a growth and is developed in the making, and is subject to restudy, and to professional consultation and criticism during its execution. Given all these conditions at their best, the result is in the lap of the gods.

## AN ARTIST'S STUDIO IN OLD SALEM

ON the water-front in old Salem is the studio of Philip Little, well known as a painter of outdoor pictures. This is near the historic Derby Wharf and not far from the House of the Seven Gables. It is a simple concrete structure about 30 by 40 feet and about 20 feet to the ridgepole. The walls are concrete and the reddish roof is of a fire-proof

material. On the water side is a plain concrete porch, surrounded by a heavy iron railing and on a line with the seawall. Here the artist can sit outdoors and paint if he chooses.

The inside of the building is almost as plain as the outside. There is a spacious studio 30 by 30 feet and about 15 feet high to the top of the roof ceiling.